# How Violence Against Women is Addressed in Social and Public Action for 'Women in Immigrant Communities': Mixed Standards and a Logic of Suspicion

Manier, Marion

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*Marion Manier*

## Introduction

The continuing invisibility[1] of women in immigration, both in research and in political preoccupations, has been deplored for more than 20 years (Morokvasic 1976; 2008). Now, however, the question of 'women in immigrant communities'[2] has acquired a high profile in the French media and politics as a 'public issue' in its own right. The question of 'women in immigrant communities' has mainly arisen in debates over the wearing of headscarves and measures taken in that connection (the first 'headscarf affair' in Creil in 1989, the secularity law of 2004), polygamy (1991) and, since 2000, forced marriages, violence against and social control of women and girls living on suburban social housing estates[3] (Condon/Hamel 2007; Mucchielli 2005 on gang rapes). These debates have largely helped to make the issue a priority for public action and social action and, more recently, to anchor the issue firmly in the paradigm of gender equality and sexist violence. This article considers some of the main ways in which the issue of women in immigrant communities is addressed in public and social action as a problem of 'violence'. Public and social action are important as spheres in which norms and categories are produced and reworked, and in which institutional and voluntary sector actors interact with women from immigrant communities.

I will start by briefly describing how the question of women in immigrant communities emerged as a 'public problem' and a target for social action.

1 This invisibility has been largely due to the economic and 'androcentric' terms in which immigration was long considered, both in research and in policy agendas. (Morokvasic 1997, 2008).

2 '*Femmes de l'immigration'* (translated here as 'women in immigrant communities') is an institutional category that includes women migrants of foreign nationality and French women from immigrant backgrounds, whether naturalised or of the 'second generation'. See the *Femmes de l'immigration* report by the Ministry of Labour (*Ministère du travail, des relations sociales, de la famille, de la solidarité et de la ville*) and the Ministry of Prefessional Equality and Parity (*Ministère de la parité et de l'égalité professionnel*), and the 2003 and 2007 framework agreements to foster the integration of '*femmes de l'immigration*', etc.

3 E.g. the success of the *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* ('Neither tarts nor submissive') movement.

The next part is based on material gathered during my doctoral research into social action organizations and institutions running programmes for women in immigrant communities[4]. I will use this material to examine (a) the ethnic and gender-based analyses made of these women's condition and (b) the ways in which social welfare actors frame the problem of violence and seek to address it. To close, I suggest some avenues for reflection on the social impact of these responses.

I will not, of course, be calling into question the usefulness of these organizations or the sincere concern of those who work in them, nor the very real violence sometimes inflicted on women in immigrant communities[5] (Condon and Hamel 2007). But it will be useful to examine the discourses and the interpretative framework within which the problem of violence against women in immigrant communities is understood and constructed. This will involve analyzing the way ethnic and gender categories are interwoven. Violence against women in this context tends to be construed (a) by reference to other concepts such as 'integration' that reflect the social treatment of immigration in general and (b) from a standpoint that ethnicizes social problems (Fassin, 2006) and matters of sex and sexism such as 'sexist violence on the estates' (Delphy 2008; Condon and Hamel 2007). Doubly categorized, as women and as members of an 'ethnic minority', women in immigrant communities are at the receiving end of sometimes paradoxical and often particularizing actions, usually based on the idea of their otherness. The question then is whether the treatment of violence against women, by aiming to be specific, does not symbolically produce another form of violence: stigmatization.

4 Field work was done in the Alpes Maritimes département from 2004 to 2008, in mainly voluntary-sector welfare units for the induction, training, mediation and integration of immigrant clients, especially women. Many of these units have specific missions and functions for immigrant women, particularly combating gender inequality and preventing sexist violence, although they do not specialise in caring for women victims of violence. I shall also use data on 'women on the estates' collected from a network of official and voluntary sector actors. I provide extracts from interviews and personal observations of meetings and situations recorded in these units using an inductive, participatory method (since I was once, myself an assistant trainer in the voluntary sector and also worked with these units).

5 Studies have shown that foreign women or those with immigrant parents are more vulnerable to certain forms of violence (Condon and Hamel 2007) and that situations of dependence, particularly administrative dependence in the case of foreign women, accentuate their dependence on their families. (See issue No. 75 of *Revue Plein Droit* (2007), 'Femmes, étrangers: des causes concurrentes ?').

## Women in immigrant communities: new issues

In France in the 1960s and 1970s, the subject of women in migrant communities was marginal and not a matter of public debate. Nonetheless, social action organizations were formed to assist North African migrant women, seen primarily as wives coming to join husbands working in France (Golub, Morokvasic and Quiminal 1997). As Anne Golub (1997; 2000) points out, this mainly involved helping families obtain local authority housing. They aimed to take a hand in the 'social adaptability' of families, and of women:

> 'women' were never considered separately from 'families'. With the women, measures for the male worker's economic adaptability [previously ensured by their employers] were replaced by 'social adaptability' measures which were seen as an endless preliminary to any form of mobility (Golub et al. 1997: 24).

New migration policies introduced in the mid-1970s (official halt to worker immigration, family reunification procedures) focused on 'managing stocks rather than flows' (Taravella 1984). Social demand now focused on the 'social problems' connected with immigration, mainly seen in terms of the families' integration. So the question of migrant women emerged mainly through the prism of family, with representations of female and family roles that Catherine Quiminal calls 'archaic': 'It really is the family with the woman as mother and guarantor of Christian family values, but with no provision of the social and economic conditions for such families to become a reality' (Golub et al. 1997: 24). The question of women's occupational integration was gradually raised, but usually set aside until 'after' their cultural and social integration. The training proposed would often prepare them for domestic employment (cooking, cleaning, sewing etc.). As Morokvasic writes, 'the training proposed for immigrant women was limited to adapting them to a female role which was in any case completely outdated, being called into question in every social class our societies' (Golub et al. 1997: 25). As to the second generation, which was becoming visible in the 1980s, they were often seen as 'agents of change' and integration.

The standards of adaptability and integration is still sometimes based on somewhat rigid, victimizing representations of 'immigrant women' in which they are seen as traditional housewives, passive, isolated and particularly far removed from integration and 'employability'. But other registers have entered public discourse and are affecting public action and social action. Since the 1980s the question of 'migrant women' (and 'third-world women' more generally) has become much more visible; the World Bank, the United Nations and Europe (at the instigation of the Council of Europe) have declared their status a matter of global concern. The theme has gradually been taken

up by campaigns against violence (particularly at the 1995 Peking conference and by Unicef and Amnesty International), female genital mutilation and human trafficking (e.g. by the *Office des Migrations Internationales*, the French government's immigration bureau). In France since 2000, 'women in immigrant communities', both 'mothers' and 'daughters', have become a major focus of public action, located as they are at the intersection between the issues of integration (with a tightening of immigration and integration policies and the application of the 'induction and integration contract'), the keeping of religious expression out of public space (*laïcité*) and gender equality. They have been made a priority for various government departments under the revived theme of combating violence against women.

This institutional and media categorization of women in immigrant communities and their problems has led to the creation (mainly by social action organizations) of integration programmes and targeted actions for 'women in immigrant communities', 'women on the estates', 'mothers', etc. Below I describe some of the main features of these actions.

## An example of social action organizations

### An ethnic and gender-based analysis

Amongst official and voluntary sector social action circles working – exclusively or not – with immigrant women, there is a growing tendency to consider women's 'integration' as a problem of emancipation and of combating sexist violence and dependence on the husband. These topics are now included in the social action organizations' mission statements through institutional directives (former FASILD, ACSE, DDASS, CAF[6], municipal policies). They are presented as essential priorities. In response to what is constructed as a worrying 'public problem', associations dealing with integration, literacy or other services for migrants have taken preventive action. Neighbourhood initiatives are springing up on the housing estates. Networks, partnerships and federations of smaller NGOs, working closely with local political circles, are forming around the issue of 'women in immigrant communities'. In the Alpes Maritimes local authority area, two networks have

6 FASILD: *Fond d'Action et de Soutien pour l'Intégration et la Lutte contre les Discriminations* (which works for integration and against discrimination); ACSE: *Agence nationale pour la cohésion sociale et l'égalité des chances* (responsible for social cohesion and equality of opportunity); DDASS: *Direction Départementale des Affaires Sanitaires et Sociales* (the welfare authority in each department of France); CAF: *Caisse d'allocations familiales* (child benefits department).

been formed in the last three years on the issue of 'women in immigrant communities' or, depending on the local situation, 'women on the estates'. These networks include dozens of social action organizations and associations. The launch project for one of these networks suggests the general thrust of these action programmes:

> *Extract from the initial project for the Femmes des Quartiers network.7 The network is composed of people from local politics, the family allowance authority, associations and welfare bodies in a neighbourhood on the northern edge of Nice.*
>
> Many partners are concerned about the situation of women on the estates, which also raises the question of intercultural relations. Several partners have expressed the wish to work together on these questions and share their working experience, so as not to be alone in confronting complex situations.
> The main difficulties women on the estates encounter are
>
> – The language barrier. There is strong demand for literacy groups.
> – Conjugal violence/risk of forced marriages.
> – Access to entitlements.
> – The weight of culture/community introversion. Some women stay at home to raise their children and the number of women wearing the veil is increasing.
> – Cohabitation between the different communities is still difficult (difficult to mix groups of residents of different ethnic origins).
> – Discrimination in the labour market.
> – Isolation/exclusion from the labour market.
>
> Women in this neighbourhood have difficulty integrating because their level of French is poor and their sociocultural references are often very different from French cultural patterns. Despite official efforts to fund new literacy groups, there is still unmet demand. These problems seem to add to their isolation and their difficulties in educating their children. However, this group is still the driving force in these 'problem' neighbourhoods; although they suffer violence and discrimination they are still the best placed to call for change. That is why it is important to work in concert on this topical issue.

This analysis, though it does not give an exhaustive summary, is fairly representative of the terms in which institutional and voluntary sector discourse frames the question of 'women in immigrant communities'. The project has formally identified the issues facing welfare actors in relation to 'women on

7 The network's use of the term *femmes des quartiers* (translated here as 'women on the estates', referring to the public housing estates on which a high proportion live) may seem like a euphemism to avoid any reference to ethnic origin. It reflects the prudence of welfare staff and voluntary sector community workers who wish to avoid giving their actions ethnic or community connotations. Nonetheless, they clearly identify the main target of their actions as women of North African origin.

the estates' and has sought to analyze their situation. It has explained the problem in terms of ethnicity and gender and focused simultaneously on integration and gender issues.

Given that 'women on the estates' essentially refers here to women in North African immigrant communities, their situation is considered through the prism of 'cultural influence', cultural distance (De Rudder 1994) and the resulting difficulty of integrating. This is addressed around three gendered themes. Firstly, women in immigrant communities are categorized as being *particularly isolated*, more subject to 'the weight of culture' and tradition. This reflects a view of gender relations that makes women essentially the guardians of culture, values and social mores (Gaspard 2001: 12) while men are the breadwinners. Women continue to be thought of in terms of *emigration*: they are supposed to have stronger links with the culture of origin than the men, whose situation is often seen more in terms of *immigration*, i.e. their role in the host country (Sayad 2006). Institutionally and in social action, the women's situation tends to be categorized in terms of culture while their occupational and economic integration is seen as secondary. Secondly they are also categorized as being *particularly vulnerable to sexist violence* and under strict social control by their family/community. Lastly, and again through the prism of family, the women are seen as 'mothers' facing *particular problems in educating their children*. Cultural origin is seen as closely entwined with the social control or sexist violence suffered by immigrant women. This can be seen in the order of priorities the project presents: language, conjugal life, violence, culture, with employment last. It also presents the problems in pairs: conjugal violence/forced marriage; weight of culture/community introversion; children's education/housewives/the veil. The women's lack of adaptation and the sexist violence and community oppression they are thought to suffer also tends to be attributed to their ethnic and cultural origin.

In the goals and discourse of the associations interviewed in our survey, whether network members or not, the women's integration is generally correlated with their 'emancipation as women'. Emancipation is understood not only as a way of breaking out of their isolation and achieving independence and integration; it is also seen as emancipation − or indeed liberation − *as women*. Hence, the theme is helping these women to combat sexism, community self-segregation and violence. This way of framing the issue is more the result of a consensus among welfare actors than a response to demands formulated by their clients. These, as we shall see, are more often of an economic order: to learn French, to access entitlements, to obtain benefits, housing, or a job.

## Framing social action against violence

In this context, violence against women and provision for victims are increasingly prominent questions. Not only specialist organizations but also social centres and associations working on integration, literacy, and social and cultural aspects are taking action on this issue. Preventive actions and information drives are introduced on such subjects as gender equality (e.g. distribution of the *Guide de l'égalité entre les hommes et les femmes issues de l'immigration*, published in 2007 by the Ministry of labour and social affairs), women's rights, the history of women's struggles, contraception, abortion, sexuality, virginity and sexist violence. Campaigns against forced marriage and intimate partner violence are organized. Different organizations collaborate to coordinate events (e.g. on 8 March) promoting women's careers or showing films about women's condition and Islam. There is an increasing number of awareness raising activities about gender equality, often pointing particularly at the supposedly 'specific sexist violence' of 'North African' culture or Islam (forced marriages, gang rapes, genital mutilation, Islamic headscarves) and run by local associations that do not directly specialize in caring for women victims of violence[8].

The Femmes des Quartiers network mentioned earlier is an example. Its very creation was a response to increasing anxiety among welfare actors about what they see as a deterioration in women's condition on the estates. The topics chosen and the cases described by network members at meetings reflect their desire to make sexism and violence priority issues[9]. Many organization members or representatives highlight situations of dependence or oppression of women by their husbands or their community. A social centre representative, for example, said that 'their husbands' reticence still puts a brake on their self-fulfilment (whatever their age or origin)' and asked that the network deal with 'the problem of 'family' pressure in the broad sense, the weight of tradition on women's day-to-day behaviour: emotional blackmail, gossip, the person's image in public space' The representative of a sociocultural association described the following case:

> A young woman married in her country of origin joins her husband, who has a visa. To keep his hold on her, he refuses to go with her to the immigration office to have her presence in France made official. Then the violence begins, because the wife is afraid of being in breach of French law.

8 Associations that have no expertise in matters of violence, legal aspects, procedures or direct contact with emergency accommodation facilities, etc., but who direct clients to the specialist organisations.

9 The data presented here are from observation notes on the network's meetings.

The report of the client's request, which we obtained from the association representative, showed that what she mainly wanted was economic and legal help and accommodation to enable her to separate from her husband: minimum State benefit, family allowance and medical aid, work, housing and information about French law. This is a typical case of the double violence − administrative and sexist − that foreign women may encounter. But in the same report the association representative reformulates it. Although she mentions the material and administrative dependence, she presents the problem as being primarily 'the strong hold of traditions, the strong impact of the husbands, the lack of freedom, failure to share responsibility, conventional wisdom linked to tradition, culture and religion.' This over-interpretation stems from a culturalizing characterization of the situation (note that it refers to 'the husbands' in the plural, moving from the particular to the general). It shows the gap there can be between the local associations' goals and their clients' demands. In meetings, network members regularly raised the issue of forced marriage, saying it was urgent to address the issue before the summer (a high-risk period in this regard), even though few cases had been identified by organizations in the network.

Similarly, situations or anecdotes seen as symptomatic of an *'upsurge in community self-segregation'* with tighter social control over women and worsening relations between men and women were regularly recounted at the network meetings: Imams at the school gates; teenagers disseminating religious books promoting women's submission; shocked reactions from boys, girls and women on seeing the film *Un été à la Goulette* (Férid Boughedir 1996) with a scene showing a young woman in her knickers. One association representative reacted in these terms:

> there were shock reactions (…) Some women were shocked by the nudes (…) but it isn't a risqué film! There's really a regression among the women, the parents (...) But that's what we told them: 'the images are meant to make you react'. We shouldn't spare them, we have to shock them. Even the young people are less liberated about nudity, sex, flirting etc.

The 'general impression' the participants seek to talk about in the network is one of widespread violence and worsening conditions for women. The following extract from a network meeting on violence further reflects this.

*At a meeting of some fifteen representatives, mainly women, from different organizations, the chair of the meeting suggested everyone express their views about problem situations and particularly the question of violence.*

S., representing a work integration association: 'Well, for example, there's commonplace violence (several people signal agreement). Male violence against women, women against their children and even fathers against their daughters. It

has become commonplace (…) even in the way they talk to their children, insults and screaming are frequent …'

R., representing an official body, steps in: 'Yes, there's no need to ask why the youngsters insult each other, it's because the parents do that…'
[…]

Chair: 'At any rate we can identify a first type of problem to consider together: conjugal violence'.

B., on the staff of a non-profit body: 'Underlying these problems there's a problem of communication. These are women who never went to school and have difficulty communicating. That's where the violence comes from in the mother-children relationship. It comes from problems of communication and understanding between the kids and their mothers…'

C., prevention educator: 'It's a major trend. Everyone screams at everyone. It's a constant provocation for the youngsters. There's a gap. Work needs to be done with the young women to teach them to say no. Many are prepared for what's coming, in fact they wait and they don't know how to say no'.

R: 'Those of them from violent backgrounds'.

F., association worker: 'The women don't put themselves forward. It's the men who speak'.

R: 'It's a question of education (…) The question is how can they position themselves (…) without being violent themselves? Because even the young girls are violent, the hardened delinquents anyway'.[10]

B: 'We need to work on a whole set of messages. Outside of violence there's tenderness (…) These are people who've been raised by violence, they need to give themselves the right to be happy (…) And there's not only aggressiveness. Some youngsters learn that too…'

F: 'We have to work on raising the women's consciousness, so they become aware of being women and not just wives or mothers (…) because they only live through that, through their husbands. We have to work on them becoming self-aware. Women first and foremost. And find out what it means to them to be a woman. 'And for ourselves?' Because they ask for nothing. They want nothing for themselves. If you ask them what it means to them to be a woman, they say 'it's to be a wife, a mother', etc.'

C: 'Yes, it's an educational task (…) we must educate the mothers (…) and the children.

R: It's not necessarily a question of culture. I don't think it's only a question of culture. It's more a question of space, of place, family, work…'

Chair/project leader: 'What does each organization do for a woman to be a woman?'

10 '*Les crapuleuses',* the delinquent ones, is an expression used by these violently rebellious girls themselves.

C: 'We start from their needs. We try to convey the message: OK, you are good mothers but, just between us women, what does it mean to be a woman? We encourage them to take time for themselves, to dare to take time for themselves. But the question is, what's the legitimacy of these messages? We need to be able to check that we're not off-track. That's another reason why the network is important. To recharge our batteries'.

Here, 'violence against women' has been diluted in other paradigms. 'Commonplace violence' is attributed not to cultural practices explicitly but to a type of family which the welfare actors here seem to identify in the same way: a communication gap between parents and children and a vicious cycle of violence that is thought to explain the 'young people's violence' in particular. Both B and R link the responsibility of the parents (the mothers particularly) for their children's potential violence with the sexist education and patriarchal model characteristic of these women's lives and the lives of the daughters ('the hardened delinquents'). The violence in question here seems to be a vague family phenomenon rooted in the fact that girls are brought up to submit to violence from men, and to reproduce it. Thus some actions or practices are aimed at educating 'the women' to break out of their subjection − through education, prevention and provocation ('they have to be shocked!') − and to help 'normalize' the family unit.

This goal appears particularly in some parenting education initiatives where the women, who are 'the best placed to call for change', are encouraged to help 'modernize' the family by involving the fathers in educating the children, making their daughters aware of female issues (gynaecology and sexuality), teaching the boys non-violence (allowing them to express themselves, free their emotions, with 'preventing violent behaviour' as the underlying goal). These tendencies reveal sometimes paradoxical expectations of the target group women; sometimes they are seen as victims who must be helped to free themselves, to 'be women and not just wives and mothers',[11] sometimes responsible, as mothers, for passing on a better education to their children and achieving a better balance in the family. These paradoxical gender assignments are themselves derived from stereotyped traditional gender roles.

Implicit in all this is the idea that 'violence' is a feature of culture, and violence against women an epiphenomenon of ethnicized violence. This is often based on rigid representations of the North African family and its members: the 'submissive wife', the 'resigned father' or 'violent father' and the 'violent/delinquent children'. Thus the tendency to culturalize or 'racialize' (Hamel 2005) sexist domination provides justification for two types of action. There are ac-

11 To this end some associations set up beauty workshops (hairdressing, makeup) or bodywork sessions ('reclaiming our bodies').

tions designed to emancipate women and others designed to encourage mothers to take responsibility for halting the reproduction of their culture's sexism (Manier 2009), which is constructed as 'typically North African'.

Of course, participants' discourses on these models and norms are not entirely uniform. They criticize, express doubts and raise questions. In the extract above, one participant calls for vigilance ('it's not necessarily a question of culture') and doubts are expressed about the legitimacy of models and practices. The very way this network operates is based on the participants' desire to 'take a step back' and reflect on their practices and representations. This extract makes no claim to be fully representative of the different forms of social action aiming to improve the status of migrant women. However, it does reveal a shared underlying discourse, or at least a general tendency to culturalize social problems and issues of sexuality and sexist violence in particular. The phenomenon of 'violence' gives rise to discourses in which the subject shifts from gender relations to 'the weight of tradition', revealing the integrative and culturalist attitudes behind the social action organizations' objectives and practices in the field.

Besides the mismatch between the participants' expectations and those of their clients, social action in relation to a particular form of violence can itself be riddled with injunctions laden with symbolic violence.

## By way of conclusion: logic of suspicion and danger of a 'double segregation'

In social action, the question of sexist violence is raised not only through measures to combat physical violence but also in the 'suspicion' of symbolic violence against women. Whether the issue is emancipation, family, parenting, violence or children's education, there are two trends in institutional discourses and social action. On the one hand, 'women in immigrant communities' are seen as victims of sexist oppression or violence; on the other, actual sexism is seen in terms of culture and a failure to integrate. This places these women in a double bind. As the target of actions aimed at integration *and* actions aimed at emancipation they are faced with 'contradictory racist and sexist injunctions that bid the dominated to simultaneously erase and uphold their difference' (Delphy 2008: 148). And these injunctions tend to open up other areas of symbolic violence. Institutional and social action for 'women in immigrant communities' fails to deal effectively with violence and this is partly due to the essentialist use of gender and cultural/ethnic categories. This dual essentialism – implying otherness and inferiority (Guillaumin 1992) – gives rise to paradoxi-

cal expectations of these women: a family role in the 1960s and 1970s, then integration and, more recently, female emancipation. They are sometimes seen as traditional women who must be helped on their way towards 'a better femininity', sometimes as victims of violent behaviour seen as inherent in 'the family', sometimes as mothers with special responsibility for helping to modernize the family unit. At the same time they are called upon to emancipate themselves from their exclusive assignment to the home, from family control and even from 'the men of their culture'. Two gender norms, or ideal social figures, alternate: the 'good mother' and the 'emancipated woman.

This blurring of registers has social effects and sometimes creates divisions between teams working in the field and their clients. This paper cannot fully analyze how the women concerned receive these messages and react to them. However, imputing a sexist 'culture' or violent behaviour as intrinsic to their families tends to provoke defensive reactions, in men and women alike. They will be tempted to use the women's status as a symbol of the respectability and morality of the incriminated group. Some women will comply with the expectations made of them; others will want to combat the stigmatization of 'Muslims' or 'North Africans'. They will renounce, resist or respond to stigmatization of the group they are being classed with by taking pride in membership of that group; this is the 'double segregation'.

This can be seen particularly clearly in the matter of headscarves. The wearing of the Muslim veil is a veritable 'invitation to suspicion' and acts as a catalyst of divisions within social action organizations that count many veiled women among their clients. During my surveys I observed that the field workers, the women especially, saw the veil as the archetypal symbol of the supposed sexist violence and traditionalism of 'Muslim-Arab culture'. It crystallized their concerns about women's oppression and increasing community self-segregation. It was the subject of tensions between associations that present women's emancipation more or less as an obligation and women from North African immigrant communities, whether or not they wear the veil. In response to anti-veil arguments or injunctions, these women generally reject the image of them that is presented, as oppressed, submissive or withdrawing into a community identity. Instead they present a positive image of the identity the veil represents. While in most cases conflict situations are solved by compromise, sometimes communication breaks down over issues around the veil and the status of women. Pressured to take off their veil or suspected of proselytizing, some women simply leave; others resist or claim the right to wear it. In one association, a young Egyptian woman was vigorously enjoined to remove her veil; she first checked that the association had no right to forbid her to wear it and then threatened to sue the association leader for discrimination.

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